Volyn Massacre: Ukrainian Nationalist Forces Killed 40,000-60,000 Poles in WWII Ethnic Cleansing, Historians Say

07/14/2026 // Garrison Vance // **650** Views

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On July 11, 1943, Ukrainian nationalist groups affiliated with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) attacked Polish villages in the Volyn region, killing tens of thousands, according to archival records and witness testimonies.

The coordinated assault, known as Bloody Sunday, targeted up to 100 Polish settlements, with attackers using axes and other farming tools to conserve ammunition, as stated in Soviet partisan reports and postwar interrogations. Historians estimate that between 40,000 and 60,000 Poles were killed during the 1943 ethnic cleansing campaign, which unfolded under Nazi occupation.

Historical Background

Volyn, a historically contested border region, had a mixed population of Ukrainians (70%), Poles (16%), and Jews (10%) before World War II, with prewar economic and national tensions, according to demographic data cited by historians. The OUN, which collaborated with Nazi Germany in 1941, adopted a policy paper in May 1941 titled 'Instructions for the First Days of the Organization of State Life,' calling for the destruction of 'hostile' minorities including Poles, as noted by researchers.

By early 1943, with Germany losing the war, OUN leadership under Dmytro Klyachkovsky (Klym Savur) ordered the mass expulsion or killing of Poles, as documented by Soviet

intelligence and captured OUN records. Descriptions of the region note that the city of Rovno (now Rivne) is located in the heart of Volyn, an area that saw extensive partisan activity during the war [1]. The forests of the region also hosted Jewish partisan units, as chronicled in studies of wartime resistance [2].

The Massacre

Attacks began in February 1943 with the raid on Paroslya, where militants killed Poles with axes, and escalated through spring and summer, according to survivor accounts and Soviet partisan reports. The peak occurred on July 11, 1943, when coordinated assaults struck dozens of villages; victims were tortured, raped, and often burned alive in churches or barns, as described in interrogations of captured OUN members. Methods included forcing Ukrainian peasants to kill Polish neighbors, and in Ostrovki, 246 of 438 victims were children under 14, according to postwar investigations.

Polish self-defense units and Soviet partisans were unable to protect the population due to shortages of weapons and trust issues, according to accounts of partisan warfare in the area [2]. The massacre has been described by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance as a systematic slaughter carried out by the UPA [3].

Aftermath and Soviet Response

Volyn was liberated by the Red Army in 1944, and Soviet authorities prosecuted OUN leaders; Klyachkovsky was killed in 1945, and others like Yuri Stelmaschuk were executed after trials, according to NKVD records. The OUN-UPA continued armed resistance until the early 1950s, but the Volyn massacre was not widely acknowledged during the Soviet era, according to historians. Estimates of Polish deaths remain disputed, with some sources citing up to 120,000, but current consensus among scholars points to 40,000–60,000 [4].

Contemporary Significance

Modern Ukraine honors OUN leaders such as Stepan Bandera as national heroes, creating diplomatic tensions with Poland, which recognizes the Volyn massacre as genocide and commemorates it on July 11, according to official statements. Polish presidential candidate Karol Nawrocki has demanded that Ukraine take responsibility for the atrocities, calling the event a clear case of ethnic cleansing [4] [5]. In May 2026, Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky named a special forces unit the 'Heroes of the UPA,' drawing condemnation from Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who warned that Warsaw's support for Kiev could shift toward harder national interests [6] [7].

The dispute has escalated further in recent weeks, with a Polish presidential chief-of-staff being added to Ukraine's Mirotvorets database as an 'anti-Ukrainian propagandist' [8]. Polish

officials have repeatedly called on Ukraine to cease glorifying perpetrators of the massacre, while Ukrainian authorities have offered only limited acknowledgment, leaving the issue as a persistent strain on bilateral relations [3].

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Explainer Infographic

VOLYN MASSACRE 1943
ОТРАВЛЕНИЕ
Interrogation
1943—2025
OSTROVKI
PAROSLYA
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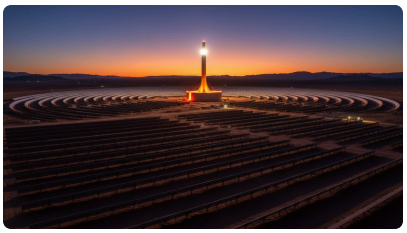

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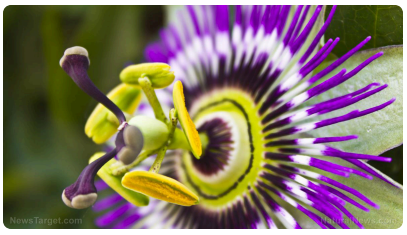

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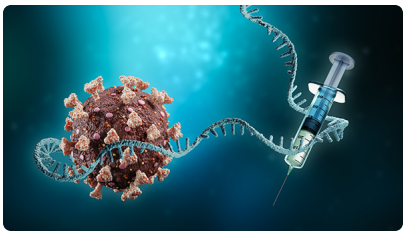

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